

DELAWARE AVENUE
Washington
District of Columbia

HABS NO. DC-699

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PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
National Park Service
Department of the Interior
P.O. Box 37127
Washington, D.C. 20013-7127

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HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY

DELAWARE AVENUE

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Location: Two segments of the original Delaware Avenue remain in the southwest quadrant. The southernmost portion curves west from the Canal Street near O Street before continuing northeast for about five blocks on its original course between the former site of N Street and H Street, SW. Three blocks north, a block-long segment remains between D and C streets, SW. Approximately three blocks of the avenue extend from Constitution Avenue, NE, to Union Station Plaza at Massachusetts Avenue. With the exception of less than half a block that remains between L and M streets, NE, the rest of the right-of-way is covered by the railroad tracks extending northeast from Union Station.

Owner/Manager: The right-of-way remains the property of the U.S. government. From Union Station northeast to the city limits is the railroad right-of-way. From Union Station, southwest to D Street, the right-of-way falls under the jurisdiction of the Architect of the Capitol. The remaining stretch in the southwest quadrant is maintained and managed by the District of Columbia.

Present Use: Less than half of this avenue remains intact. The two-block segment between the Capitol and Union Station serves as a major ceremonial vista; the five-block segment between H and N streets, SW, serves local traffic.

Significance: This avenue was intended to provide vistas and access to the Capitol Grounds from both the northeast and southwest. The 1908 construction of Union Station reinforced its importance as an access to the Capitol, but covered the roadway northeast of the station with railroad tracks. Urban redevelopment of the 1950-70s and the construction of the Southwest Freeway closed several blocks of the avenue in the southwest quadrant to traffic, but for the most part, the right-of-way remains open space.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Date of plan: 1791, L'Enfant Plan; 1792, Ellicott Plan.

2. Alterations and additions:

1901: Avenue closed and abandoned between the south line of Florida Avenue and M Street, NW, and between F and C streets, NW, for construction of the railroad station (Public Resolution 5 March 4, 1901).

1901-08: Construction of Union Station eliminated the roadway between E Street and Florida Avenue, NE.

1954-63: During extensive program of urban renewal and the construction of the Southwest Freeway, approximately four blocks of the avenue, between P and N streets and between H and D streets southwest were closed and reservations south of the Capitol were transferred to the District of Columbia.

1965: Rayburn Office Building completed in right-of-way,
closing the block south of the Capitol.

B. Historical Context:

On L'Enfant's plan this avenue extends northeast from a large open space known as Greenleaf Point (now Fort Leslie J. McNair) at the southern tip of the city on the Potomac River. More than 28 acres on this point were appropriated by the federal government as Appropriation No. 5 for the site of an arsenal. From there, the avenue continues northeast at 12 degrees to a yellow-shaded square at its intersection with the roadway that would become Virginia Avenue, SW. One block north, it crosses over the St. James Creek Canal before reaching the Capitol Grounds. Four blocks north of the Capitol Grounds, it meets a large open square at its intersection with Massachusetts Avenue (now the site of Union Station) before terminating at Boundary Street, NE, at the site of an open area featuring a spring.

On Andrew Ellicott's plan of 1792, the avenue runs northeast at 17 degrees and the canal runs along its southern leg for four blocks. No open space is indicated at its intersection with Virginia Avenue. The avenue then intersects with the Capitol Grounds, with no open space at its Massachusetts Avenue intersection.

On both plans, Delaware Avenue is one of four avenues intersecting the Capitol Grounds, and it forms a mirror image of New Jersey Avenue, which runs northwest at a complementary angle. In planning this avenue, L'Enfant paid particular attention to the water sources throughout the city. Delaware Avenue connects the spring at Florida Avenue with the Capitol Grounds. L'Enfant stipulates in his notation on the plan that water from the spring in excess of that needed by the Capitol would flow from a cascade at the base of the edifice 20' tall and 50' wide into a reservoir below "thence to run in three fills through the garden into the grand canal." Ellicott maintained the idea of the spring at the head of Delaware Avenue supplying water to the Capitol, but made no reference to a cascade, noting that "the water of this stream may be conveyed to the high ground where the Capitol stands and after watering that part of the city may be destined to other useful purposes."

The land over which this avenue was planned spanned tracts of land originally owned by Notley Young, Daniel Carroll, and David Burnes.¹ After the land was acquired by the federal government for the right-of-way in 1791, it developed rather slowly. When the canal was built in the early eighteenth century, it did not follow this avenue as Ellicott had envisioned on his plan; instead it ran one block to the east. One of the earliest developments in the vicinity of the avenue was the arsenal built on Greenleaf's Point, at the south end of the avenue in 1822. In 1826, a penitentiary joined the arsenal on the point. In this region south of the Capitol, the avenue ran through swampy ground, as is evident on the Boschke Map of 1857-61. The map shows little development along the avenue, but at the open area formed at the intersection of Second Street, SW, at least six structures stand within the planned roadway. The avenue was still largely undeveloped after the Civil War, for the chief officer of the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds (OPB&G) charged with managing the federal land in the city wrote: "The impossibility at present of using Delaware Avenue has already

¹ Toner map.

been noticed."²

North of the Capitol, the avenue paralleled the Goose Creek and crossed one of its tributaries around E Street, NE. Development of the avenue was impeded by these creeks, uneven ground, and ravines, and later the railroad tracks built along the avenue right of way in the 1860s. A distribution branch of the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad ran along the avenue from H to E Street, NW, and the Metropolitan Street Railway traversed it for one block between B and C streets. Commenting on the condition of this segment of the avenue in 1868, OPB&G Officer Brig. Gen. Nathaniel Michler wrote:

"It is a constant marvel to every visitor and traveller that so little has been done towards the advance of improvement in that direction. Under the very eaves of the Capitol, within a stone's throw of its north portico, the eye is forced to rest upon one of the most unfinished, unsettled, and offensive localities . . . This is no doubt principally in consequence of the railroad passing through and also somewhat owing to the low nature of the grounds."³

By the 1880s the only part of the avenue that was improved was the segment between the Capitol and C Street, paved with granite trap block, and two blocks between C and E streets that were graded and graveled. The two blocks north of the Capitol were lined with elms, and the stream that flowed through the ravine in the vicinity was channelled under the road at a sewer between C and D streets.⁴ Park improvements were usually made in tandem with street improvements, and by 1884 the triangular reservation at E Street was enclosed with a park post-and-chain fence and had gravel walks, gas lamps, and a rustic fountain; the park directly north of it at Massachusetts Avenue was enclosed with a post-and-chain fence. The latter reservation became a freight yard for the Baltimore and Ohio Railway Company, however; according to the OPB&G, its usage as such was "in violation of the law."

By 1903, Reservation Nos. 224 and 225 were the only ones improved at all. The avenue had been paved with macadam from the Capitol to N Street, SE, but north of Massachusetts Avenue, the roadway remained unimproved. The events of 1901 would prevent this northern segment from ever being realized as a paved boulevard. On the occasion of the city's centennial, a commission was formed, at the request of Michigan Senator James McMillan to evaluate Washington's landscape and make plans for its improvement. One of the city's most grievous problems was a railroad station on the public grounds set aside as a park at the city's founding, the Mall. Through the negotiations and plans of the McMillan Commission, the competing railroad companies in the city agreed upon the creation of one central Union Station.

After some debate, a site three blocks northeast of the Capitol at the intersection of Massachusetts and Delaware avenues was chosen and confirmed by

² Annual Report . . ., 1868.

³ Annual Report . . ., 1868.

⁴ Hopkins map; Board of Commissioners map.

an Act of Congress February 29, 1903.⁵ According to the plan, all of Delaware Avenue north of E Street would be covered by the many tracks leading to the station, and the five reservations along this segment (Nos. 224-228) were donated by Congress for use as a rail right-of-way. The OPB&G moved the stones from the rustic fountain in Reservation No. 224 to Lincoln Park. Although construction of the station eliminated nine blocks of Delaware Avenue, NE, and five of its tiny parks, it gave new importance to the two blocks that remained as the roadway connecting the monumental train station and the Capitol. A large semicircular plaza was created within the Delaware Avenue right-of-way at the entry to the station. Known as Columbus Plaza, Reservation No. 334 was embellished in 1912 with a 43'-tall marble fountain honoring Christopher Columbus (See HABS No. DC-694). The station became a focal point for the city and the tree-lined Delaware Avenue leading from the station to the U.S. Capitol was among the first vistas seen by visitors arriving to the city by rail. Soon after the station was completed, the United States entered World War I and temporary dormitories for wartime workers were built on the federal land flanking the avenue between the White House and Capitol.

Meanwhile, south of the Capitol, Delaware Avenue developed slowly. The southwest quadrant, known since the early nineteenth century as "the island," was divided from the rest of the city by the canal that crossed Delaware Avenue at D Street, SW. In the 1870s, railroad tracks along Virginia Avenue, which crossed Delaware Avenue at E Street, SW, further alienated this quadrant from the rapidly developing northwest and southeast quadrants.

The condition of Delaware Avenue was improved slightly when the canal crossing it was filled in the 1880s, and the railroad grade crossing at E Street was elevated above the roadway after the consolidation of 1903. Due to the isolation of the neighborhood, it was inhabited largely by working-class blacks and immigrants in small, crowded, brick and frame rowhouses. Throughout the twentieth century, housing conditions in the southwest quadrant were studied, described and decried regularly, and a variety of solutions were posed. As early as 1901, Congress mandated that more playgrounds be built for the children residing in these neighborhoods in an effort to mitigate crowded and unsanitary conditions. On Delaware Avenue, Reservation No. 215 was set aside for this use in 1905. Of all of the roadways in Southwest, Delaware Avenue had the most potential for beautification; in 1917 the Commission of Fine Arts envisioned the avenue as a grand boulevard linking the Capitol to the Army War College at Greenleaf Point, recommending that it be paved and the parks along it landscaped. Nevertheless, it remained largely neglected, and although most of its reservations featured trees by the 1920s, they were poorly maintained and lacked fencing, fountains, and flowerbeds. To solve the housing conditions, the entire quadrant was targeted for urban renewal from the 1940s. This became a reality in 1954 when bulldozers began wholesale clearing of the buildings, roads, and parks in Southwest.

As part of this redevelopment, Delaware Avenue was largely reconfigured and all of the reservations in the southwest quadrant were transferred from the National Park Service--in charge of the public grounds since 1933--to the District of Columbia. Although six-or-so blocks of the avenue were closed to traffic, the development plan attempted to respect the axis of the avenue, leaving open spaces and parks along most of its former right-of-way. Despite the fact that the road no

⁵ Olaszewski, 32.

longer leads to the Capitol, the dome is still visible through the treetops from the roadway.

The 1960s construction of a high speed, elevated freeway cutting through the southeast and southwest quadrants further alienated Delaware Avenue from its historic intention. West of Delaware Avenue, the freeway runs along the right-of-way of F Street, SW. East of the avenue, a portion of the freeway turns south to run along Virginia Avenue, above and alongside the old railroad right-of-way while several lanes head north to form the center leg of the freeway.

The most recent insult to the avenue was the early 1960s construction of the Rayburn Building between South Capitol and First Street, SE, closing the avenue between Independence Avenue and C Street and eliminating it as one of the avenues radiating from the Capitol.

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. Overall dimensions:

1. Width: The right-of-way is 160' wide from building line to building line.
2. Length within city limits: Of the original 1.1 miles south of the Capitol, approximately 0.5 remain intact; of the 1.25 miles north of the Capitol, approximately 0.25 miles remain intact.

B. Elements within right-of-way:

1. Roadway: Between the curbs, the paved roadbed in the remaining segments of the avenue supports two-lane, two-way traffic and curbside parking; parallel parking in the southwest quadrant and angle-parking in the northwest quadrant.
2. Sidewalks and street trees: The two-block segment between Union Station and the Capitol is lined with wide concrete sidewalks and sodded strips planted with mature shade trees that form a canopy over the roadway. Less consistent rows of trees line the remaining segments of the avenue in the southwest quadrant between the sidewalks and the roadway.
3. Large reservations:

Delaware Avenue terminates in front of Union Station two blocks northeast of the Capitol at Columbus Plaza, Reservation No. 334 (see HABS No. DC-694).
4. Small reservations: The following list describes the location of each reservation identified along this avenue by 1894, the date it was first recognized as federal property, the date of transfer, the date of first improvement, if known, and a description of its appearance historically and as of summer 1990.
 - a. Reservation No. 214: Southeast of the avenue, west of Third Street, north of P Street, SE. Although this triangle was officially identified in 1884, it was probably never improved as a park and

was transferred to the District of Columbia September 29, 1960 (Land Record 347). It is now encompassed within the grounds of a public housing project.

- b. Reservation No. 215: Northwest of the avenue, east of Third Street, south of N Street, SE. Although this triangle was officially identified in 1884, it was probably never improved as a park and was transferred to the District of Columbia September 25, 1960 (Land Record 247). It is now encompassed in the property of a high-rise condominium.
- c. Reservation No. 216: Southeast of the avenue, west of Second Street, south of M Street, SE. Although this triangle was officially identified in 1884, it was not improved until the early twentieth century when several trees were planted. It was transferred to the District of Columbia March 22, 1956 (Land Record 215). It is now encompassed within the grounds of a public housing project.
- d. Reservation No. 217: Southeast of the avenue, west of Second Street, north of M Street, SE. Although this triangle was officially identified in 1887, it was not improved until the early twentieth century when several trees were planted. It was transferred to the District of Columbia December 14, 1972, and is now maintained as a sodded traffic island.
- e. Reservation No. 218: Northwest of the avenue, east of Second Street, south of K Street, SE. Although this triangle was officially identified in 1887, it was not improved until the early twentieth century. It was transferred to the District of Columbia March 22, 1956 (Land Record 215). It is now encompassed within the grounds of a public housing project.
- f. Reservation No. 219: Northwest of the avenue, east of Second Street, north of K Street, SE. Although this triangle was officially identified in 1884 it was not improved until the early twentieth century. It was transferred to the District of Columbia March 22, 1956 (Land Record 215). It is now encompassed within the grounds of a public housing project.
- g. Reservation No. 220: Southeast of the avenue, west of First Street, south of H Street, SE. Although this triangle was officially identified in 1884 it was not improved until the early twentieth century. It was transferred to the District of Columbia February 20, 1957 (Land Record 237). It is now encompassed within the grounds of a public housing project.
- h. Reservation No. 221: Southeast of the avenue, west of First Street, north of H Street, SE. Although this triangle was officially identified in 1884, it was probably not improved as a park until the early twentieth century. It was transferred to the District of Columbia September 29, 1960 (Land Record 346). It is now

encompassed in the property of a low-rise apartment complex.

- i. Reservation No. 222: Northeast of the avenue, east of First Street, south of F Street, SE. Although this triangle was officially identified in 1884, it was improved in the early twentieth century when several trees were planted. It was transferred to the District of Columbia September 25, 1963. It is now lost somewhere in the midst of the Southeast/Southwest Freeway ramp system.
 - j. Reservation No. 223: Northeast of the avenue, east of First Street, north of F Street, SE. Although this trapezoid was officially identified in 1884, it was improved in the early twentieth century when several trees were planted. It was transferred to the District of Columbia September 25, 1963. It is now lost in the midst of the Southeast/Southwest Freeway ramp system.
 - k. Reservation No. 224: Southeast of the avenue, west of First Street, south of F Street, NE. By 1884 this trapezoid featured a post-and-chain fence, gravel walks, gas lamps, a rustic fountain, trees, shrubs and a flower border. February 28, 1903, it was transferred to the Philadelphia, Washington, and Baltimore railroad companies for the construction of Union Station.
 - l. Reservation No. 225: Southeast of the avenue, west of First Street, north of F Street, NE. By 1884 this trapezoid featured a post-and-chain fence, trees, and shrubs. February 28, 1903, it was transferred to the Philadelphia, Washington, and Baltimore railroad companies for the construction of Union Station.
 - m. Reservation No. 226: Northwest of the avenue, east of First Street, south of H Street, NE. Officially recognized in 1884, this trapezoid was occupied by railroad tracks by 1894. February 3, 1903, it was transferred to the Philadelphia, Washington, and Baltimore railroad companies for the construction of Union Station.
 - n. Reservation No. 227: Southeast of the avenue, west of Second Street, north of L Street, NE. Officially recognized in 1884, this triangle was occupied by railroad tracks by 1894. February 3, 1903, it was transferred to the Philadelphia, Washington, and Baltimore railroad companies for the construction of Union Station.
 - o. Reservation No. 228: Northwest of the avenue, east of Second Street, north of M Street, NE. Officially recognized in 1884, this trapezoid was occupied by railroad tracks by 1894. February 3, 1903, it was transferred to the Philadelphia, Washington, and Baltimore railroad companies for the construction of Union Station.
5. Buildings: The Rayburn House Office Building stands in the right-of-way between Independence Avenue and C Street, SW; the U.S. Capitol Building interrupts the avenue between Independence and Constitution avenues, and Union Station stands roughly between E and F streets in the former avenue

right-of-way.

6. Front yards: Whereas most of the other rights-of-way throughout the city include portions of federal land maintained by the occupants of the flanking buildings, Delaware Avenue occupants do not for the most part abide by this system since few, if any of the abutting squares are privately owned.
- C. Framing elements: In the southwest quadrant, the avenue runs through government subsidized housing in the form of high-rise apartment buildings and detached multi-family units. The new construction in the southwest quadrant has not adhered closely to the building lines, so the borders of the right-of-way are not clearly defined. In general, the buildings are set back from the roadway with lawns. The four flanking city squares in the northeast quadrant are landscaped as parks.
- D. Vistas: There are reciprocal vistas through tall trees between the U.S. Capitol and Union Station. Although the avenue is discontinuous in the southwest quadrant, the Capitol dome can be seen through the trees from many places along the avenue in the southwest quadrant.

PART III SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. Maps:

Army Corps of Engineers. "Map of the City of Washington showing the Public Reservations Under Control of the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds." 1884, 1887, and 1894.

Board of Commissioners. "City of Washington Statistical Map Showing the Different Types of Street Trees." 1880.

Board of Public Works. "Exhibit Chart of Improved Streets and Avenues." 1872.

Boschke, A. "Topographical Map of the District of Columbia surveyed in the years '57, '58, and '59."

Ellicott, Andrew. "Plan of the City of Washington." 1792.

Hopkins, G. "Map of the District of Columbia from Official Records and Actual Surveys." 1887.

L'Enfant, Pierre Charles. "Plan of the City of Washington." 1791.

Toner, Joseph M. "Sketch of Washington in Embryo." 1874.

B. Early Views:

1927-29: Survey photographs of each reservation (photographs of reservations under NPS jurisdiction are in the NPS Reservation Files; those transferred to the District of Columbia are in the HSW Reservations Collection).

C. Bibliography:

Annual Reports of the Office of Public Buildings and Grounds. U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. 1867-1933.

Olszewski, George. Construction History of Union Station. National Park Service: 1970.

Record Group 42. National Archives and Records Administration (NARA RG42).

Reservations Collection. Historical Society of Washington.

Reservation Files. Office of Land Use. National Capital Region Headquarters. National Park Service.

Prepared by: Elizabeth Barthold
Project Historian
National Park Service
1993

PART IV. PROJECT INFORMATION:

The Plan of Washington, D.C., project was carried out from 1990-93 by the Historic American Buildings Survey/Historic American Engineering Record (HABS/HAER) Division, Robert J. Kapsch, chief. The project sponsors were the Morris and Gwendolyn Cafritz Foundation Inc. of Washington, D.C.; the Historic Preservation Division, District of Columbia Department of Consumer and Regulatory Affairs, which provided Historic Preservation Fund monies; the National Capital Region and its White House Liaison office, NPS; and the National Park Foundation Inc.

HABS historian Sara Amy Leach was the project leader and Elizabeth J. Barthold was project historian. Architectural delineators were: Robert Arzola, HABS; Julianne Jorgensen, University of Maryland; Robert Juskevich, Catholic University of America; Sandra M. E. Leiva, US/ICOMOS-Argentina; and Tomasz Zweich, US/ICOMOS-Poland, Board of Historical Gardens and Palace Conservation. Katherine Grandine served as a data collector. The photographs are by John McWilliams, Atlanta, except for the aerial views, which are by Jack E. Boucher, HABS, courtesy of the U.S. Park Police - Aviation Division.